GARRISON'S 'BATTLE'

Your obituary of former New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison omitted the most significant contribution of his public life. Well before the Kennedy assassination, Garrison won a vital battle for free speech and criticism of government.

During his attempts to limit vice on Bourbon Street, Garrison angrily charged that some New Orleans judges were corrupt. The state of Louisiana prosecuted him for criminal libel, which is roughly defined as a malicious defamation. Garrison appealed his conviction to the United States Supreme Court. In overturning the conviction, the Court held that criminal libel of public officials could be punished only if the speaker knew he was wrong or acted with reckless disregard of the truth. This decision extended to criminal libel the standard for civil libel announced in the landmark case of *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan*.

Justice William Brennan wrote for the Court, "Debate on public issues will not be uninhibited if the speaker must run the risk that it will be proved in court that he spoke out of hatred; even if he did speak out of hatred, utterances honestly believed contribute to the free interchange of ideas and the ascertainment of truth."

Garrison thus made possible his own subsequent criticism of the government and, indeed, protected criticism of his official conduct.

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I do not remember him but the name seems familiar